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British Nuclear Culture: Official and Unofficial Narratives in the Long Twentieth Century

JONATHAN HOGG

London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2016

xiv+231 pp., ISBN 978-1-4411-6976-1 (pbk), (£21.99)

On 13 March 1983, Adrian Mole refused to send his mother a Mothers' Day card. He stated that 'interpersonal relationships in our family have gone completely to pot. That is what living with the shadow of the bomb does to you'.¹ The previous year, Sue Townsend's teenage diarist had voiced the hope that the bomb would not be 'dropped before I get my GCE results[.]... I wouldn't like to die an unqualified virgin.'² Mole's concerns are among the many sombre, alarming and darkly comic responses to 'The Bomb' uncovered in *British Nuclear Culture*. Jonathan Hogg's monograph offers a comprehensive cultural history of Britain in the nuclear age: it traces how British culture has engaged with nuclear technology in the 'long twentieth century', from the Curies' discovery of radium in 1898 to video-gaming in 2015.

The book's analysis is driven by four interpretative strands: 'nuclearity', language, official vs. unofficial responses and nuclear anxiety. Although a lot of space is dedicated to narrative, the monograph's strengths lie in the final two strands, showing that British people were not just potential casualty statistics, as depicted in the nuclear response plan outlined in the Strath Report (1955), but capable of producing varied cultural outputs in response to the changing realities of the nuclear world. Hogg observes that 'so much of the nuclear age has been written from the official perspective alone', as with the authoritative studies of high-level decision making by Peter Hennessey, Lorna Arnold and Katherine Pyne.³ *British*

¹ Sue Townsend, *Adrian Mole from Minor to Major* (London, 1991), 337.

² *Ibid.*, 156.

³ Peter Hennessey, *Cabinets and the Bomb* (Oxford: 2007); Lorna Arnold and Katherine Pyne, *Britain and the H-Bomb* (Basingstoke, 2001).

Nuclear Culture calls for historians to look beyond these assessments of individuals as ‘passive’ recipients of nuclear policy. The responses Hogg analyses range from the familiar areas of anti-nuclear protest and Civil Defence, to less well-known nuclear references in film, music, television, advertising, theatre and entertainment. The book examines the changes in nuclear representation across six separate time periods, with the bulk of its analysis concentrated on the Cold War era. Although some of the nuclear references explored are more fleeting than others (such as Alan Partridge’s call to ‘go nuclear’ in the early 1990s), they nevertheless highlight the astonishing pervasiveness of nuclear culture and ultimately substantiate one of Hogg’s main points that the nuclear threat had lost much of its immediacy by the end of the century. Nuclear technology had become a permanent reality.

Hogg’s book speaks to several emergent areas of historiography. Together with Jeff Hughes and Kirk Willis (who first coined the term ‘British nuclear culture’) Hogg’s work has been instrumental in developing ‘nuclearity’ as an interdisciplinary research area.⁴ The book also chimes with growing popular fascination in the misplaced scientific optimism of the early twentieth century, as with Kate Moore’s recent *The Radium Girls*.⁵ Radium’s potential in everyday life was espoused in newspapers and advertisements for all manner of items (as Hogg notes, the *Daily Mail* even predicted that nocturnal golf might catch on). *British Nuclear Culture* also has implications for the study of Cold War Britain. Recent issues of *Cold War History* contain vociferous debates about whether historians should examine the Cold War beyond the geopolitical rivalry of the US and Soviet Union: has the term Cold War become too capacious a term, applied too liberally to anything that happened, in any part of the world, after 1945? ⁶ Hogg’s monograph can contribute to this debate, showing that there is indeed value in looking at a ‘distinct corner of British culture’ to write an alternate history

⁴ Jonathan Hogg and Christoph Laucht, ‘Introduction: British Nuclear Culture’, *British Journal of the History of Science*, 45, 4 (2012), 479-493; Kirk Willis, ‘The Origins of British Nuclear Culture, 1895-1939’, *Journal of British Studies*, 34, 1 (1995), 59-89.

⁵ Kate Moore, *The Radium Girls* (New York, 2016).

⁶ Federico Romero, ‘Cold War Historiography at the Crossroads’, *Cold War History*, 14, 4 (2014), 685-703

of the Cold War, as people across the world lived with ‘the shadow of the bomb’ and interpreted this threat in culturally specific ways.

Britain’s Nuclear Culture makes important interventions in modern British history too: it tells a non-elite story of the nuclear age and makes effective use of local newspapers, uncovering stories ranging from suicide pacts to criticisms of untidy, ‘bearded’ anti-nuclear protestors. *British Nuclear Culture* also raises questions about selfhood and nuclear culture: the development of the H-Bomb in the 1950s induced a widespread sense of individual powerlessness. The select number of oral histories used also reveal these concerns still further. The people behind these stories are, perhaps inevitably, still largely absent. Similarly, although the book claims to be an ‘emotional history’, it does not always fulfil this claim, with its focus on literary or filmic representations. Nor are a range of emotional responses considered. For instance, with its newspaper focus, sensational representations (such as such as ‘The Family Who Feared Tomorrow’ and who washed up on Blackpool Beach in August 1957) are given precedence and there is little room is left for *apathy* as a response to nuclear weaponry. Particularly in the late twentieth century when concerns seem to fall into ‘the background’ or people convince themselves that ‘everything is fine’, can historians identify a fatalistic ambivalence towards nuclear capabilities? The emotional history and lived experience of the nuclear age thus remains just out of reach. Nevertheless, the captivating insights on non-elite cultural history of post-1945 Britain, together with the detailed research underpinning each chapter, this monograph is an important addition to contemporary British history.

There are areas of potential expansion. The book makes tantalising references to the role of decolonization in feeding nuclear anxiety and to the rise of ‘nuclear kitsch’ in the early twenty-first century, both areas that merit further analysis. Throughout the book, the concept of the ‘long twentieth century’ too remains curiously under-theorised and the knock-

on effects of the changing international situation after 2001 only addressed cursorily. Nevertheless, Hogg's monograph will undoubtedly prove an excellent staple for both post-1945 historians and undergraduate British history courses: its detailed source-base, innovative focus and reader-friendly presentation (complete with primary source and definition inset boxes) make it a highly useful text on a fascinating area of British history.

Grace Huxford

University of Bristol

grace.huxford@bristol.ac.uk

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